

Herbal medicine and the treatment of Hepatitis C

By Tom O Brien

Hepatitis C is a virus that affects the liver. The Hepatitis C virus was identified in 1989. Adequate diagnosis tests have been available since 1991. It is primarily spread by exposure to contaminated blood or needles (Hoffman, p.285).

It is estimated that 500 million people around the world have Hepatitis C.

Hepatitis C is a complicated virus. It has at least 9 main subtypes, called genotypes. The Hepatitis C virus is one of the most common causes of liver disease in the world today. Currently there is no vaccine for Hepatitis C.

The Hepatitis C virus can cause liver problems. For some people, these liver problems become serious. In a small number of cases, the illness can become life threatening. Some people feel well but have serious liver problems. Other people can often feel unwell but have few liver problems.

Common symptoms

Fatigue

Confusion

Memory problems

Depression

Allergies

Fluid retention

Liver pain

Intolerance to alcohol and fat

Vitalistic perspective

There are thousands of viruses in our environment and they have always been there. Researchers have identified 4000 viruses and they estimate that for each of the 30 million species of life on Earth has at least one virus living in compatible symbiosis within it. Of the millions of viruses, only about 150 are known to cause human disease (Buhner, 2000: 103).

When viruses start to kill people we get worried and initially respond by trying to develop a vaccine or anti-viral treatment. However viruses really only become problematic when they breach our immune system. Hepatitis has been doing this increasingly over the past century, with the outbreak of war and the increased need for blood transfusions (medical technology). This along with our changing dietary patterns and increased drug and alcohol consumption, has meant that our collective societal liver and immune systems have been exposed to greater challenges than ever before. Energetically Hepatitis C is a symptom of our out of balance collective immune system. In the past our diets consisted of more bitters. Foods like dandelion were a normal part of our daily consumption. When our diets consisted of more natural foods, greens and bitters our livers were more prepared for the challenges of hepatic viruses.

Virologists have discovered that when a balanced symbiotic virus is disturbed it can jump species (Buhner, 2000: 106). We need to learn how to co-exist with viruses and weeds (herbs) if we are to survive as a species.

Herb classifications for the treatment of Hepatitis C

The treatment of hepatitis C should aim to target a number of systems e.g., immune system, nervous system to treat the depression, promote the flow of bile, waste elimination and detoxification and address any addiction that the patient might have. Buhner (2000) recommends three types of liver herbs in the treatment of hepatitis C; 1) herbs that reverse or prevent damage to liver cells; 2) herbs that possess anti viral action against hepatitis viruses, and 3) herbs that reverse hepatitis symptoms and optimize liver functioning.

Hoffman (2003: 285-286) recommends adaptogens, anti-inflammatory, antioxidant, antiviral, detoxifying, hepatics, nervines and immunostimulant.

Adaptogens

According to Hoffman, adaptogens reinforce the body's resistance against stressors. They increase the capacity to withstand stressful situations. The general aims of treatment with adaptogens are to reduce stress and prevent burnout and exhaustion. Adaptogens work on the liver by converting glycogen to glucose, leading to increased blood glucose levels (Hoffman, 2003: 483).

Anti-inflammatory

Hepatitis C is an inflammation of the liver. Anti-inflammatory herbs reduce the symptoms of discomfort associated with inflammation. Herbs like *Glycyrrhiza glabra* and *dioscorea villosa* contain steroids that reduce some kinds of inflammation.

Hepatics

Hepatics are herbs that aid the work of the liver in a number of ways. They tone, strengthen and increase the flow of bile.

Nervines

Nervines are herbs that strengthen and nourish the nervous system. Depression is one of the symptoms of hepatitis C. As depression is strongly associated with the liver and so when treating hepatitis C, we also treat depression.

Specific herbs for hepatitis C

Boldo (*Peumus Boldus*)

Boldo is a South and Central American herb. It has a number of actions including, hepatoprotective, anti-inflammatory, bitter, anti-bacterial and anti-fungal. Boldo is one of the best herbs for reducing liver pain and inflammation, protecting the liver from toxin damage, stimulating the production of bile, easing sleep disturbance, promoting and supporting healthy functioning of the kidneys, thus taking the load off the liver (Buhner, 2000: 27).

Bupleurum (*Bupleurum chinense*)

Bupleurum grows in China. Bupleurum is effective in normalizing liver function and stimulating immune response. Bupleurum has been tested in at least 37 studies and has been found to have strong liver protective, antihepatotoxic, and antiviral activity for hepatitis viruses. Most studies used hot water extracts (strong tea). Side effects may include headaches, anger or nausea in some people.

Burdock (*Arctium lappa*)

Burdock is an alterative, that moves the whole body and internal organs to a balanced state of health, especially for balancing and restoring the liver and kidneys. The diuretic action of the seeds helps to promote water elimination as the kidneys take some burden off the liver. Burdock acts particularly through the liver and lymphatic system stimulating metabolism through the liver and removing waste from the blood.

Dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale*)

Dandelion is a great liver herb, that can be seen grown in and around most communities in Ireland. The leaves can be added to a salad as a digestive and

liver tonic. Dandelion has been found to protect the liver and reduces the inflammation associated with hepatitis.

Milk Thistle (*Silybum marianum*)

Milk thistle is well known for its protective and supportive function in the liver. It also helps to regenerate damaged liver tissue, restoring and normalizing liver function. It also supports immune function. One of its main constituents, silymarin, has been extensively tested in human trials with promising effects.

Formula and herb preparation

Tinctures are the most efficient and effective way to transport herbs to the liver.

References

Buhner, S (2000) Herbs for Hepatitis C and the Liver. Story Publishing: MA.

Hoffman, D (2003) Medical Herbalism. Healing Arts Press: Vermont.